

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

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April 3, 2019

The Honorable Andrew Wheeler
Administrator
Environmental Protection Agency
1301 Constitution Ave. NW
Washington, D.C., 20460

Dear Administrator Wheeler,

We write to express our concern about the Program Outlook issued yesterday by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regarding the upcoming workflow of the Integrated Risk Information System (IRIS).¹ The list issued is identical to that issued on December 19, 2018, but the message accompanying the list formally stated that the EPA is officially discontinuing IRIS's work on formaldehyde.

The formaldehyde assessment has been ready for public comment since at least the end of 2017, as confirmed by your predecessor, former Administrator Scott Pruitt, at a January 2018 Senate hearing.² Though the Agency has been successful in suppressing its release to the public, press reports indicate that the IRIS assessment concludes formaldehyde causes leukemia and other cancers.³ It is unacceptable that the EPA is hiding information on a probable carcinogen from the American people.⁴

On March 20, 2019, the EPA announced that formaldehyde will be assessed under the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA).⁵ It is absurd that formaldehyde can simultaneously be a high-priority chemical under TSCA and not be a priority at all for IRIS. These processes are not mutually exclusive, nor do they serve the same purpose, and it is unacceptable that the agency is apparently treating them as such by discontinuing IRIS's work. When asked about this discrepancy at a Science Committee hearing last week, Dr. Jennifer Orme-Zavaleta, the Principal Deputy Assistant Administrator for EPA's Office of Research and Development (ORD), said: "I wouldn't say that [formaldehyde is] not a priority for IRIS. We have

¹ "A Message from the IRIS Program," Environmental Protection Agency, April 2019, accessed here: https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2019-04/documents/iris_program_outlook_apr2019.pdf

² Eric Levitz, "The EPA Is Hiding Proof That a Widely Used Chemical Causes Leukemia: Report," *New York Magazine*, July 6, 2018, accessed here: <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/07/the-epa-is-hiding-proof-that-formaldehyde-causes-leukemia.html?gtn=top>n=top>

³ Annie Snider, "Sources: EPA blocks warnings on cancer-causing chemical," *Politico*, July 6, 2018, accessed here: <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/07/06/epa-formaldehyde-warnings-blocked-696628>

⁴ "Formaldehyde," International Agency for Research on Cancer, Volume 100F, 2012, accessed here: <https://monographs.iarc.fr/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/mono100F-29.pdf>

⁵ "Reaching Another TSCA Milestone, EPA Identifies 40 Chemicals to Prioritize for Risk Evaluation," U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, March 20, 2019, accessed here: <https://www.epa.gov/newsroom/reaching-another-tsca-milestone-epa-identifies-40-chemicals-prioritize-risk-evaluation>


not discontinued that work.”⁶ Dr. Orme-Zavaleta is the highest-ranking career official at ORD, and it appears she was unaware of EPA’s plan to drop IRIS’s formaldehyde assessment just one week before the decision was publicized. These decisions should come from a sincere, deliberative process that includes career scientists, but it appears political appointees at EPA left Dr. Orme-Zavaleta in the dark. Furthermore, the Agency allowed its principal deputy assistant administrator of ORD to come to the Science Committee hearing unprepared to answer questions on EPA’s plans for a highly controversial chemical.

In order to understand the decision-making process behind formaldehyde’s shift from IRIS’s to TSCA’s priority list, we request a staff-level briefing from relevant parties in the Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention (OCSPP), ORD, and any other office that participated in decisions related to formaldehyde. We request that the EPA send employees who are capable of fully answering questions on the issues outlined in this letter and discussed at last week’s hearing. Please have your staff contact Janie Thompson or Sara Palasits at (202) 225-6375 to schedule the briefing.

The formaldehyde assessment has been years in the making. The National Academies of Sciences stands ready to review the assessment, already having entered a \$500,000 contract with the EPA.⁷ We urge EPA to allow the formaldehyde assessment to be released for review and to stop hiding the chemical’s dangers from the American people, whose tax dollars paid for this work and whose well-being depends on the agency fulfilling its mandate to protect human health and the environment.

Sincerely,


Eddie Bernice Johnson
Chairwoman
Committee on Science, Space & Technology


Mikie Sherrill
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight

Cc:
The Honorable Frank Lucas
Ranking Member
Committee on Science, Space & Technology

⁶ “EPA’s IRIS Program: Reviewing Its Progress and Roadblocks Ahead,” House Committee on Science, Space, & Technology, March 27, 2019, accessed here: <https://science.house.gov/hearings/epas-iris-program-reviewing-its-progress-and-roadblocks-ahead>

⁷ Annie Snider, “Sources: EPA blocks warnings on cancer-causing chemical,” *Politico*, July 6, 2018, accessed here: <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/07/06/epa-formaldehyde-warnings-blocked-696628>